



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

United Arab Emirates

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2004](#)

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven semi-autonomous emirates. Traditional rule in the emirates generally is patriarchal, with political allegiance defined in terms of loyalty to the tribal leaders, to the leaders of the individual emirates, and to the leaders of the federation. There are no democratically elected institutions or political parties. There are no general elections; however, citizens may express their concerns directly to their leaders through traditional consultative mechanisms, such as the open majlis, or council. The seven emirate rulers constitute the Federal Supreme Council, the highest legislative and executive body. The Council selects a President and Vice President from its membership; the President, in turn, appoints the Prime Minister and Cabinet. On November 4, the Council elected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan to succeed his late father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, as head of state for a 5-year term. The Constitution requires the Council to meet annually, although individual leaders meet frequently in more traditional settings. The Cabinet manages the federation on a day-to-day basis. A consultative body, the Federal National Council (FNC), consisting of 40 advisors appointed for 2-year terms by the emirate rulers, reviews proposed legislation, discusses the annual budget, and may question federal government ministers in open sessions. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, its decisions were subject to review by the political leadership. The country was not affected by serious international or internal conflict.

Each emirate maintains its own police force. The federal Ministry of Interior oversees the Police General Directorates in each of the seven emirates. While all emirate internal security organs theoretically are branches of the federal Ministry of the Interior, in practice they operate with considerable autonomy. Each Police General Directorate supervises the police stations in that emirate. The civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces. There were no reports that security forces committed human rights abuses.

The country has a free market economy based on oil and gas production, trade, tourism, transportation, and light manufacturing. The expatriate population comprises about 85 percent of the estimated 4.04 million population. Each emirate independently owns local oil and gas production, although nearly all of the country's oil and gas resources are located in Abu Dhabi. The emirate of Dubai has developed into the lower Gulf's leading financial, commercial, transport, and tourism center. The 2003 GDP real growth rate was 7 percent. The GDP growth rate not including the oil sector was 5.8 percent. Oil price increases during the year made a significant contribution to the economy. Wage increases in both the private and public sectors were not linked to the rate of inflation. The economy provided citizens with a high per capita income, but it was heavily dependent on foreign skilled and unskilled workers.

Problems remained in the Government's respect for human rights. Citizens do not have the right to change their government. The Government restricted freedom of speech and of the press. The press practiced self-censorship. The Government restricted free assembly and association, and it restricted religious freedom by banning proselytizing of Muslims. The Government restricted the rights of workers, many of whom were not protected by labor laws. There are no labor unions. There were poor working conditions for some laborers, failure to pay wages, and abuse of foreign domestic servants in an economy in which 98 percent of the private sector workforce is foreign. There were no independent human rights organizations. Trafficking in women as prostitutes and very young foreign boys as camel jockeys continue to be serious problems, despite government pledges to end these practices.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits torture, and there were no reports that government officials employed it; however, Shari'a (Islamic law) courts sometimes impose flogging sentences on Muslims (except in Dubai, where flogging is banned), and on some non-Muslims, found guilty of adultery, prostitution, and drug or alcohol abuse. There were reports that flogging, when imposed, generally was carried out symbolically to prevent major or permanent injuries; however, in 2003 there was at least one case in Abu Dhabi Emirate of authorities using a leather strap to administer the flogging sentence, which left substantial bruising, welts, and open wounds on the recipient's body.

Prison conditions generally met international standards, and the Government permitted visits by independent human rights observers. However, prison conditions varied widely from emirate to emirate, and some rural prisons were overcrowded and had spartan living conditions. There were Ministry of Interior reports of prison overcrowding in Abu Dhabi and reports by a Dubai prison official of overcrowding in Dubai prisons. Noncitizens represented approximately 75 percent of all prisoners. Men and women are housed separately. Conditions for women were equal to or slightly better than those for men. Pre-trial detainees were held separately from convicted criminals before trial. Juveniles were held separately from adults. Security prisoners were held separately from the general populace, in special sections of the regular prisons. Conditions in these sections were not significantly different than other parts of the prisons.

Police in Dubai and Abu Dhabi allow NGOs access to observe prison conditions, if requested; however, there were no reports of any requests for such visits during the year. Members of religious and national communities regularly met with prisoners. Representatives from the General Women's Union (GWU), a local organization partially funded by the Government, regularly met with female prisoners, helped financially, and paid airfare, when necessary, to repatriate noncitizens after their release.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the Government generally observed these prohibitions. However, the law permits incommunicado detention, and the Government has in the past used it in sensitive criminal cases in which the police claim that communication between the accused and a third party could jeopardize their investigation. There were no reports of incommunicado detention during the year.

The federal Ministry of Interior oversees the Police General Directorates in each of the seven emirates; however, each emirate maintains its own police force and supervises the police stations in that emirate. While all emirate police forces theoretically are branches of the federal Ministry of the Interior, in practice they operate with considerable autonomy. Police stations take complaints from the public, make arrests, and forward all cases to the Public Prosecutor. These cases are then transferred to the courts. All cases are filed with the Ministry of Interior. Incidents of police corruption are uncommon, and there was no evidence of police impunity during the year.

The Government has taken a number of measures to train the police with respect to human rights issues. During the year, Dubai police opened Human Rights Care Departments in all Dubai emirate police stations. These departments are mandated to protect the human rights of both victims and perpetrators of crimes, and to prevent illegal law enforcement practices that might be committed against crime suspects.

In January, Dubai police held a law enforcement training seminar focusing on human rights protection, including crime victim protection.

In April, Dubai police and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) sponsored the First Regional Arab Police Human Rights Training Workshop. The 5-day, 400-delegate workshop covered a broad range of human rights issues for participants from 17 countries.

The Abu Dhabi Police Officers' Training Institute held an Anti-Trafficking in Persons training symposium in May and a Human Rights training symposium for law enforcement personnel in November.

The law prohibits arrest or search without probable cause, and the Government generally observed its provisions. The security forces generally obtained warrants.

Under the Criminal Procedures Code, police must report arrests within 48 hours to public prosecutors, who must determine within the next 24 hours whether to charge, release, or order further detention pending an investigation. Public prosecutors may order that detainees be held up to 21 days without charge. In cases of felonies or misdemeanors punishable by imprisonment, authorities must obtain court orders after 21 days for additional detention. Court-ordered extensions may not exceed an additional 30 days of detention without charge. Judges may renew this 30-day detention indefinitely. Suspects have the right to protest any extensions of their detention periods ordered in absentia. An anti-terrorism law passed in July increases the amount of time that public prosecutors can hold suspects in terrorism-related cases without charge from 21 days to 6 months. Afterward, terrorism cases are handled by the Supreme Court, which may extend the detention period indefinitely.

There were complaints from several diplomatic missions that authorities did not always notify them when their citizens were

detained or arrested.

There is no formal system of bail; however, authorities can release detainees temporarily who deposit money, an important document such as a passport, or an unsecured personal guarantee statement signed by a third party. Those arrested on regular charges were generally allowed to telephone third parties while in detention.

Defendants in cases involving loss of life, including involuntary manslaughter, can be denied release in accordance with the law. However, bail usually is permitted after a payment of compensation to the victims' families, commonly called "blood money," or diya, which is a form of financial penalty imposed on defendants in criminal cases involving a killing.

A defendant is entitled to an attorney only after the police have completed their investigation. As a result, police can question accused persons sometimes for days or weeks without benefit of legal counsel if the Prosecutor General approves.

There were no reports of political detainees.

Rulers of the individual emirates regularly pardon prisoners on religious and national holidays. Most pardoned foreign nationals were deported.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, its decisions were subject to review by the political leadership.

There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and civil courts for civil law matters. Civil courts generally are part of the federal system, except in the Dubai and Ras Al-Khaimah Emirates, and are accountable to the Federal Supreme Court, which has the power of judicial review as well as original jurisdiction in disputes between emirates or between the federal Government and individual emirates. The emirates of Dubai and Ras Al-Khaimah have their own local and appellate courts, which have jurisdiction over matters within their territories that the Constitution or federal legislation does not specifically reserve for the federal system. The emirates of Dubai and Ras Al-Khaimah do not refer cases in their courts to the Federal Supreme Court for judicial review, although they maintained a liaison with the federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments.

Each emirate administers Shari'a courts. In some emirates, these courts consider all types of civil and commercial cases as well as serious criminal cases and family matters. They act in accordance with traditional Islamic law and practice, but also are required to answer to the Federal Supreme Court. Dubai has a special Shi'a council to act on matters pertaining to Shi'a family law (see Section 5).

The Constitution provides accused persons the right to a speedy trial. This right was invoked most often in civil cases, with civil defendants at times demanding same-day disposition of the cases filed against them. Authorities generally brought criminal defendants to trial in 2 to 3 months, with the exception of more slow-moving drug-related cases, in which authorities are required to inform the office of the ruler for the emirate in which the offense was committed.

Trials can last more than a year, depending on the seriousness of the charges, number of witnesses, and availability of judges. Review of criminal cases by the local ruler's court, or diwan, as well as bureaucratic delays in processing or releasing prisoners, at times resulted in time served beyond the original sentences.

Many judges were noncitizen Arabs, whose mandates were subject to periodic renewal by the Government. The percentage of citizens serving as public prosecutors and judges, particularly at the federal level, continued to grow. Between 55 and 60 percent of all judges were citizens.

Legal counsel may represent defendants in both court systems. Under the Criminal Procedures Code, the defendant has a right to government-provided counsel in all cases involving a capital crime or possible life imprisonment, regardless of whether the defendant is financially able to hire counsel. The Government provides counsel to indigent defendants charged with felonies punishable by imprisonment of 3 to 15 years.

Defendants are presumed innocent. All trials are before judges, not juries, and trials are public, except for national security cases and those deemed by the judge likely to harm public morality.

Each court system has an appeals process. Death sentences may be appealed to the ruler of the emirate in which the offense is committed, or to the President of the Federation. The Government normally negotiates with victims' families, often offering financial compensation, or diya, to the victim's families to receive their forgiveness and commute death sentences. Eliminating death sentences does not affect prisoners' incarceration periods.

Non-Muslims who are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts can receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims can be overturned or modified by a higher court.

In cases in which a defendant is acquitted, the prosecutor may appeal the acquittal to a higher court. The higher court may receive additional evidence. The appellate standard for overturning an acquittal is "without the slightest doubt of guilt."

The local rulers' diwans, following traditional prerogatives, maintain the practice of reviewing many types of criminal and civil offenses before cases are referred to the prosecutor's office. The diwans may review sentences passed by judges and return cases to the court on appeal. The diwans' involvement, which typically occurs when the case involves parties from two different emirates or a citizen and a noncitizen, can lead to long delays prior to and following the judicial process.

The military has its own court system. Military tribunals try only military personnel. There is no separate national security court system.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution prohibits entry into homes without the owner's permission, except with a warrant and in accordance with the law, and the Government generally respected these prohibitions in practice. Only police officers and public prosecutors carrying a warrant are permitted entry into homes. Officers' actions in searching premises are subject to review, and officers are subject to disciplinary action if their actions are judged to be irresponsible. Local custom and practice place a high value on privacy, and entry into private homes without owners' permission is rare. A female police officer is required to be present during the search of a private home when male family members are absent.

Authorities do not commonly screen private correspondence; however, there have been reports of censorship of incoming international mail. The Government-owned Internet provider, Etisalat, regularly blocks internet sites determined to be "objectionable" (see Section 2.a.).

Family matters for Muslims are governed by Shari'a law and the local Shari'a courts. Muslim women are forbidden to marry non-Muslims. In such cases, both parties can be arrested and tried. However, Muslim men are free to marry all women "of the book," which means Muslim, Christian and Jewish women (see Section 5).

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the Government restricted these rights in practice. The law prohibits, under penalty of imprisonment, criticism of the Government, ruling families, and friendly governments, as well as other statements that threaten social stability; however, the law was rarely enforced because journalists practiced self-censorship.

Two of the country's newspapers, Al-Ittihad and Al-Bayan, were government-owned and one privately owned newspaper, Al-Khaleej, received government subsidies. Most privately-owned newspapers no longer received government subsidies. The country's largest English- and Arabic-language newspapers, Al-Khaleej and Gulf News, were privately owned. Newspapers often relied on news agencies for material. The government-owned Emirates News Agency regularly provided material printed verbatim by most newspapers.

By law, the Ministry of Information licenses all publications. The Ministry also approves the appointment of editors. The law governs press content and contains a list of proscribed subjects. Government officials reportedly warned journalists when they published material deemed politically or culturally sensitive. In March, the Minister of Education and Youth temporarily banned some reporters from accessing the ministry building and speaking with ministry employees because the reporters had previously published articles criticizing the performance of the Ministry and its officials.

A de facto ban dating from 2002 prohibiting 10 prominent intellectuals from publishing opinion pieces in the country's Arabic and English language media continued. In 2002, six academics from Al Ain University were also banned from teaching. Some of these academics were also among the 10 intellectuals banned from publishing editorials. The ban has been lifted on at least two of the individuals, and they have returned to writing and teaching. There were no new reports of additional banning of university professors or intellectuals from giving lectures or from publishing in the newspapers.

The government-owned Emirates Media, which publishes Al-Ittihad newspaper and owns Abu Dhabi's radio and television stations, forbids all its employees, including journalists, from speaking with representatives of foreign diplomatic missions without prior approval. In practice, this rule was not enforced.

While self-censorship affected what is reported locally, foreign journalists and news organizations operating out of the Dubai Media Free Zone reported no restrictions on the content of print and broadcast material produced for use outside the country.

Except for those located in Dubai's Media Free Zone, most television and radio stations were government-owned and conformed to unpublished government reporting guidelines. Satellite receiving dishes were widespread and provided access to international broadcasts without apparent censorship. The main pan-Arab dailies were not censored and were distributed on the same day of publication. Censors at the Ministry of Information and Culture reviewed all imported media and banned or censored before distribution material considered pornographic, excessively violent, derogatory to Islam, supportive of certain Israeli government positions, unduly critical of friendly countries, or critical of the Government or ruling families.

Internet access, which was open to public use with an estimated 1.11 million users, was provided through a state-owned monopoly, Etisalat. A proxy server blocked material regarded as pornographic, violent, morally offensive, or promoting radical Islamic ideologies, as well as anti-government sites. The proxy server occasionally blocked individual news stories on news websites such as CNN. The Etisalat proxy server provides access to AOL email but blocks other features that enable users to chat online, and (according to Etisalat) those that facilitate hacking. The Internet monopoly solicits suggestions from users regarding "objectionable" sites, and at times the Government responds by briefly blocking some politically oriented sites, which are sometimes later unblocked. Etisalat also blocks commercial "voice-chat" sites on the Internet.

Academic materials destined for schools were censored. Students were banned from reading texts featuring sexuality or pictures of the human body.

Unlike the previous year, the Ministry of Education and Youth did not prohibit additional books from school use.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution does not provide for freedom of assembly and association. Organized public gatherings require a government permit. In practice, the Government does not regularly interfere with informal gatherings held without a government permit in public places, unless there are complaints.

During the year, there were approximately 20 widely publicized, organized gatherings of workers complaining of unpaid wages and unsuitable working conditions before the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs building (see Section 6).

Citizens normally confined their political discussions to the numerous gatherings, or majlises, held in private homes. There were many citizen associations subsidized by the Government, organized for economic, religious, labor, social, cultural, athletic, and other purposes.

Although the Government does not permit freedom of association without prior permission, there were no reports that the Government interfered with associations that formed without prior permission.

There are no political organizations, political parties, independent human rights groups, or trade unions (see Sections 3 and 6.a.). All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are required to register with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and receive subsidies from the Government. There were approximately 100 domestic NGOs registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. However, a number of unregistered local NGOs, focused on a multitude of non-political topics, operate with little or no government interference. The Human Rights Committee of the Jurists Association, a government-subsidized association of lawyers and judicial personnel, focused on local and regional human rights issues. The percentage of citizen membership in NGOs varied widely. All private associations, including children's clubs, charitable groups, and hobby associations, required approval and licensing by local authorities, although this requirement was enforced loosely in some emirates (see Section 4).

Private associations must follow the Government's censorship guidelines and receive prior government approval before publishing any material. Participation by NGO members in any event outside the country is restricted. Participants must obtain government permission before attending such events, even if they are not speakers.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs; however, there are some restrictions on this right in practice. The Federal Constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of all seven emirates. According to the country's first census in 2001, 76 percent of the 4.04 million total population was Muslim, 9 percent was Christian, and 15 percent belonged to other religions.

The Government controls all Sunni and Shi'a mosques, prohibits proselytizing, and restricts the freedom of assembly and association, thereby limiting the ability of religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship and conduct business. The Government funded or subsidized the majority of Sunni mosques and employed all Sunni imams; approximately 5 percent of Sunni mosques were entirely private, and several large mosques have large private endowments. A committee of the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments drafts and distributes all Friday sermons to Sunni and Shi'a imams. The Government monitors all sermons for political content.

The Government supports a moderate interpretation of Islam. All Sunni imams are employees of either individual emirate departments or of the Federal Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments. Dubai's Department of Islamic Affairs and

Endowments has approval authority over preachers in that emirate's private mosques.

The Shi'a minority, concentrated in the northern emirates, was free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques were considered private and received no funds from the Government. The Government did not appoint sheikhs for Shi'a mosques, but it did monitor all sermons closely. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai can pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts.

Several non-Muslim groups own houses of worship where they can practice their religion freely, although the local ruler owns the land. Groups that did not have their own buildings were limited in their ability to assemble for worship and required to use the facilities of other religious organizations or worship in private homes. The police or other security forces did not interfere with these gatherings.

Individual emirates exercised considerable autonomy in religious matters. There did not appear to be a formalized method of granting official status to religious groups. Facilities for Christian congregations were far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim groups, which significantly outnumber the Christian population. There are 24 Christian churches in the country, and Christian primary and secondary schools operate in four emirates. There are two Sikh temples and one Hindu temple operating in the country, all located in Dubai. There are no Buddhist temples; however, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs in cities without temples, conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. There are only two cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community, one in Dubai and the other in Sharjah. Official permission must be obtained to use the facilities in every instance, which poses a hardship for the large Hindu community.

The Government prohibits Muslims from converting to other religions. Although non-Muslims in the country are free to practice their religion, they are subject to criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation if found proselytizing or distributing religious literature to Muslims. There is no restriction on proselytizing non-Muslims. There are no specific laws against missionary activities, and there were no reports of authorities revoking residence permits of persons suspected of such activities. Missionaries have performed humanitarian work since before the country's independence in 1971.

During the year, the media reported widely on several cases where women claimed private sector employment discrimination due to their decision to wear the "hijab" head covering, considered a religious mandate by many Muslim women. Some people called for legal protection for female employees who wear the hijab. The Government did not publish an official position on the issue by the end of the year.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2004 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The law provides for freedom of movement or relocation within the country, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice.

Unrestricted foreign travel and emigration is permitted for male citizens, except those involved in legal disputes under adjudication. Custom dictates that a husband can bar his wife, minor children, and adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country by taking custody of their passports (see Section 5). However, there was no enforcement of this custom at exit points unless there was a court order barring an individual from traveling. All citizens have the right to return.

There was a small population of "stateless" residents who either were without citizenship or had no proof of citizenship for any country. Many such persons have lived in the country for more than one generation. Many stateless residents originally were from Iran and South Asia. Other stateless residents included Bedouins and their descendants who were unable to prove they originated in the country. There is no formal procedure for naturalization, although foreign women receive citizenship through marriage to a citizen, and anyone may receive a passport by presidential fiat. Because naturalized citizens were not of the country's original tribal groups, their passports and citizenship status may be revoked for criminal or politically provocative actions. However, such revocations were rare, and there were no reports of such occurrences during the year.

Children born to all male citizens acquire citizenship at birth. The same benefit does not extend to children of female citizens married to noncitizens; however, female citizens under these circumstances can apply to the Ministry of Presidential Affairs for citizenship for their children. Passports are generally issued and citizenship is generally received even though there is no provision in the law.

In July 2003, the Government banned the widespread practice of employers forcing foreign national employees to surrender their passports as a condition of employment, although enforcement is reportedly uneven. This practice had prevented international travel or repatriation by foreign national employees without their employers' consent, and it had especially affected employees in the resolution of employment disputes. Citizens were not restricted in seeking or changing employment. However, foreign nationals in most occupations are not permitted to change employers without first leaving the country for 6 months, unless the former employer agrees to waive the requirement (see Section 6.e.).

The Government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees who meet the definition in the 1951 U.N.

Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, and it is not a party to the Convention or the Protocol. The Government does not provide protection against refoulement, or the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The Government does not routinely grant refugee status or asylum.

Refugees generally are required to petition for settlement in third countries. In the past, the Government detained persons seeking refugee status, particularly non-Arabs, while they awaited resettlement in third countries.

Last year, there were cases in which the Government indicated its intention to force refugee seekers to return home to countries where they feared persecution; however, there were no reports that such deportations took place before the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled the refugees in safe countries of transit.

The Constitution prohibits forced exile, and there were no reported cases during the year.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law does not provide citizens with the right to change their government peacefully. There are no democratic elections or institutions, and citizens do not have the right to form political parties.

Citizens could not freely change the laws that govern them. Federal executive and legislative power is in the hands of the Federal Supreme Council, a body composed of the hereditary rulers of the seven emirates that elects from its members the country's president and vice-president. Decisions at the federal level generally were made by consensus among the rulers, their families, and other leading families. The seven emirate rulers, their extended families, and those persons and families to whom they are allied by historical ties, marriage, or common interest, held political and economic power in their respective emirates. On November 4, the Federal Supreme Council elected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan to succeed his late father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, as head of the state for a 5-year term.

The rulers appoint the Federal National Council (FNC), a 40-person advisory federal consultative body. The advisors are drawn from each emirate, with proportion based on emirate population. The FNC has no legislative authority but it may question ministers and make policy recommendations to the Cabinet. The FNC's sessions were usually open to the public.

The ruling families, in consultation with other prominent tribal figures, choose new emirate rulers. By tradition, rulers and ruling families were presumed to have the right to rule, but their incumbency ultimately depended on the quality of their leadership and their responsiveness to their subjects' needs. Emirate rulers were accessible, in varying degrees, to citizens with a problem or a request.

There were very few women in senior positions. There were no female members of the FNC or the judiciary, although the law does not prohibit women from serving in these capacities, and several senior Government officials have publicly encouraged more female participation in governance. In a November Cabinet reshuffle, a prominent businesswoman was appointed Minister of Economy and Planning, the first woman to serve on the federal Council of Ministers. In Sharjah, there were seven women serving on the 40-seat Consultative Council. In no other emirates were there women in non-federal senior government positions. Other women in senior federal government positions included an undersecretary in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and two assistant undersecretaries for planning and evaluation in the Ministry of Education. The number of women serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' diplomatic corps doubled from last year to 40, comprising approximately 17 percent of the diplomatic corps. Prior to 2001, women were not allowed to serve as diplomats.

Although the small Shi'a minority enjoyed commercial success, there are no Shi'a in top positions in the federal government.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There are no truly independent human rights organizations in the country. The only local human rights NGO was the government-subsidized Jurists' Association Human Rights Committee, which focused on human rights education, and conducted seminars and symposia subject to government approval (see Section 2.b.).

In July, a group of citizens petitioned the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to approve the registration of an independent human rights NGO. The Ministry accepted the application, and the press reported widely on the move. Although the Ministry, by its own regulation, is required to act on all such applications within 30 days of receipt, the group did not receive approval or refusal by the end of the year.

Government officials were cooperative and responsive to some international human rights groups that visited the country. In January and July, Amnesty International (AI) visited the country and met government officials, citizens, and noncitizens.

Domestic NGOs are required to register with the Government and are subject to many regulations and restrictions, particularly those regulating the investigating and publishing of their findings. In practice, these restrictions, if violated, were often overlooked.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The Constitution provides for equality before the law without regard to race, nationality, or social status; however, there was institutional and cultural discrimination based on sex and nationality. Muslim women are forbidden to marry non-Muslims (see Section 1.f.). Custom dictates that a husband can bar his wife, minor children, and adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country. All male citizens can pass citizenship to their children at birth, whereas female citizens married to noncitizens cannot pass citizenship to their children (see Section 2.d.). Migrant workers infected with HIV are denied all healthcare benefits, quarantined, and subsequently deported.

Women

Shari'a, or Islamic law, governs the personal status of women, but civil law governs their activities in the civic and commercial sphere.

Abuse and rape are criminal offenses, and offenders are prosecuted and penalized. There were some reported cases of spousal abuse. The law protects women from verbal abuse and harassment from men, and violators are subject to criminal action. Police units are stationed in major public hospitals so that victims of abuse may file complaints, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Shari'a courts. In addition, attending physicians may call police to interview suspected victims of abuse. Social workers and counselors, usually female, also maintained offices in public hospitals and police stations. However, women sometimes were reluctant to file formal charges for social, cultural, and economic reasons. When abuse is reported to local police, authorities may take action to protect the complainant. All Dubai police departments, and many police departments in other emirates, have human rights and social support offices that provide assistance to women and children who are victims of abuse. The Government was generally effective in enforcing women's rights and protecting women from abuse. While abuse against women does exist, it is not considered to be a pervasive problem.

There continued to be credible reports of physical and sexual abuse of female domestic servants by some local and foreign employers (see Section 6.e.).

Prostitution is illegal; however, it has become an increasing problem in recent years, particularly in Dubai. Substantial numbers of women reportedly arrive regularly from the states of the former Soviet Union, Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, other states of the Middle East, and most recently China, for temporary stays, during which they engage in prostitution and other activities connected to organized crime. While some prostitutes were trafficked into the country, there was credible evidence that many entered the country willingly, for economic reasons.

While prostitution was widely acknowledged to exist, the Government did not address the issue publicly because of societal sensitivities. However, during the year, there was an increasing number of press reports highlighting the problems of prostitution and human trafficking.

In addition to increased policing and tightened immigration procedures, authorities also restricted the number of visas issued to single young women from certain countries of concern; however, problems continued with more facile access at airports in the northern emirates and with airline tourism companies reportedly continuing to obtain tourist visas for prostitutes.

There are no legal prohibitions against women owning their own businesses. Women working as doctors, architects, and lawyers typically did not face restrictions on licensing their own businesses. The Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and the General Women's Union regularly conducted programs to encourage small business entrepreneurship by women. In April, three women were appointed Board Members of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, marking the first time a woman had been appointed to the Board.

Women who worked outside the home sometimes did not receive equal benefits. For example, if a woman and her husband were both employed by the Government, both housing allowances would be paid to the husband because he is obliged under Shari'a to provide housing for his immediate family. The Government provided housing allowances to single women and to married women whose husbands were employed in the private sector. Women also reportedly faced discrimination in promotion.

Maternity leave for public sector employees can amount to 6 months. However, in November, the Ministry of Education implemented a regulation canceling the appointments of teachers who were pregnant. Several schools reportedly asked applicants to sign pledges not to become pregnant. The unpopular moves sparked protests from teachers and community members, and the press printed several editorials criticizing the regulation. The Ministry of Education later modified the regulation to reduce maternity leave from six months to 45 days for citizen teachers, and guaranteed that their jobs would be restored after the maternity leave.

Opportunities for women were growing in government service, education, private business, and health services. According to a Ministry of Planning report issued in 2003, citizen and noncitizen women constituted approximately 22 percent of the national workforce. The Government publicly encouraged citizen women to join the workforce and ensured public sector employment for all that apply. Women comprised the majority of primary and secondary school teachers and health care workers, and they accounted for almost half of all government workers.

Shari'a law of inheritance applies equally to men and women, although laws of distribution may differ. When a woman marries, her separate property, including her dowry, which is set by law at a maximum of approximately 50,000 dirhams (\$13,700), and the income of her separate property remain under her control and are not commingled with the separate property of her husband. During the marriage, the husband is legally obliged to provide a marital home and necessities for his wife and children. In the event of divorce, a woman takes her separate property, any amount she receives in a property settlement with her husband, plus any allowance granted for her and her children's maintenance.

There are no legal restrictions on the travel of women. However, custom dictates that a husband can bar his wife, minor children, and adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country. When practiced, this was commonly accomplished by the husband taking custody of their passports (see Section 2.d.). Authorities at exit points generally did not enforce this practice without a court order.

Shari'a law is applied in personal status cases. The law permits men to have more than one wife, but not more than four at any given time.

Divorce is permissible, although often difficult for a woman to obtain. A woman may be granted a divorce if she can prove that her husband has inflicted physical or moral harm upon her. A woman also may sue for divorce if her husband has abandoned her for a minimum of 3 months, or if he has not maintained the upkeep of her or her children.

Divorced women normally receive custody of female children until the children reach the age of maturity or marry. Divorced women are normally granted custody of male children until the age of 13. If the court deems the mother to be unfit, custody normally reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. A woman who remarries may forfeit her right to the custody of children from a previous marriage.

Fornication is a crime. The Government may imprison and deport noncitizen women if they bear children out of wedlock. In the event that a court sentences a woman to prison for such an offense, local authorities, at the request of the prisoner, may hold the newborn children in a special area within the prison or place them with a relative. In rare cases, children are held in other facilities until the mother's release from prison.

The law prohibits sexual harassment. During the year, the press reported incidents of men being arrested and prosecuted for publicly sexually harassing women.

Women constitute nearly 72 percent of university students. Coeducation is prohibited in government schools and universities, with the one exception of the UAE University Executive MBA Program. In this program, men and women, as well as Emirati and expatriate students, were allowed to take classes together. The American Universities in Dubai and Sharjah, both private institutions, along with the new private university campuses being opened in Dubai's Knowledge Village, are coeducational as well. Government-sponsored women's centers provided adult education and technical training courses. Women are actively recruited to work as police officers in airports, immigration offices, and in women's prisons. The Dubai Police College also recruits women. The armed forces still accept female volunteers and their numbers are increasing yearly.

Neither the labor law nor the civil service law, which covers labor matters in the public sector, prohibits the employment of women. A man has no right under Shari'a law to ban his wife from working if she was employed at the time of their marriage. By custom and tradition, some government administrations do not employ married women without their husbands' written consent.

Children

The Government is committed to children's rights and welfare, and expends resources on the welfare of child citizens; however, noncitizen children receive fewer benefits.

Male and female children receive free health care and free public education through the university level.

Education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Citizen children are required to attend gender-segregated schools through the sixth grade, the last grade of primary education, when children can be as young as 10 or 11 years old. However, compulsory education was not enforced, and some children did not attend school. For the 2003-04 academic year, the Ministry of Education reported student dropout rates as 2.7 percent of the 107,296 primary level students (grades 1-5); 4.0 percent of the 100,138 middle school students (grades 6-9); and 6.5 percent of the 67,714 students at the secondary level (grades 10-12). The percentage of dropouts for the same year at the 10th grade level was 6.0 percent for females and 12.8 percent for males, which was the highest rate for any group of students at any level. The Ministry of Education lists the primary reasons for secondary-level dropouts as truancy, parents' will, and "others."

Housing benefits are also routinely granted to citizens with children. Some citizens opted for available government land grants and interest-free loans to build their homes. Citizens employed by the Government were also eligible to receive higher salaries to support their children who are under the age of 18, are unmarried, or have disabilities. The Government, through its Marriage Fund, encouraged citizens to marry fellow citizens by providing significant funding to subsidize dowries and to offset customarily high wedding expenses. The media regularly published articles encouraging citizens to have large families.

Noncitizen resident children are not permitted to enroll in public schools unless they live in rural areas that lack private schools. Many foreign workers in private sector employment received education allowances as part of their salary packages. The Government provided an annual subsidy of approximately 6000 dirhams (\$1600) per family to its noncitizen employees for private school tuition for those who do not receive the extra salary benefit.

Child abuse was not prevalent. Trafficking of young, noncitizen boys employed as camel jockeys continued to be a serious problem, although the Government has pledged to eliminate this practice for boys under the age of 15 (see Section 5, Trafficking).

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not specifically prohibit trafficking in persons, although child smuggling, forced prostitution, kidnapping, fornication, and pornography are crimes. In practice, trafficking in women and girls used as prostitutes and domestic servants, men used as servants, laborers, and unskilled workers, and very young boys used as camel jockeys, continued to be serious problems. The Government has pledged and taken some measures of limited effectiveness against these practices.

A number of reliable sources confirm that young boys were still being used as camel jockeys during the year. According to NGO and press reports, including one in-depth documentary by HBO's "Real Sports" program which aired in October, many boys remained subject to extremely harsh living and working conditions that, at times, led to serious injuries and death. The program alleged that not only were very young boys still being used as camel jockeys, but that these boys were subjected to physical abuse, including sexual abuse, by their supervisors and trainers. While there is no evidence that the camel farm owners/employers participated personally in these abuses, there is likewise no evidence that the camel farm owners and employers took any measures to prevent or stop the abuse occurring on their farms. Further reports accused some supervisors of subjecting boys to malnutrition. One child was killed in September after falling from a camel during a race, and many more children were reportedly injured from camel racing. The HBO television documentary highlighted the efforts by the Ansar Burney Welfare Trust International (ABWTI), a Pakistan-based human rights NGO, which has helped rescue almost 400 children from farms and tracks within the country over the past year.

Until December, camel racing was regulated by the Camel Racing Federation, composed of wealthy and influential owners. Camel racing is now instead regulated by the Ministry of Interior.

Regulations by presidential decree prohibit (or "ban") the use of boys under the age of 15 and less than 45 kilograms (99 pounds) as camel jockeys, in an effort to eliminate the trafficking of young boys to the country for this purpose. A draft law formalizing these regulations was not passed by year's end.

To enforce the regulations, the Government tightened immigration controls and mandated DNA testing for boys with questionable family ties suspected to be trafficking victims. The Government requires all camel jockeys to undergo medical testing to prove their age and fitness level before issuing ID cards, which are required to be displayed by all jockeys at racetracks. Police and Camel Racing Federation officials reported they regularly conducted inspections at camel races to ensure the jockeys met regulations.

Camel farm owners who are first-time offenders of the child camel jockey ban are liable for a fine of 20,000 dirhams (\$5,500). Repeat offenders can receive a 1-year participatory ban from camel racing. Third-time and subsequent offenders receive imprisonment. There were no publicly available statistics on prosecutions and fines.

The Government worked with source country embassies, consulates, and NGOs to repatriate some of the boys who were trafficked in the past to work as camel jockeys. There are no government statistics available to estimate how many underage foreign boys, currently or previously working as camel jockeys, remained in the country. ABWTI estimates approximately 5,000 boys are still in the country working as camel jockeys. Combined, ABWTI, the Government, and the Embassy of Pakistan were responsible for, and in many cases collaborated on, the rescue and repatriation of at least 400 underage boys during the year.

In December, the Government opened a shelter and rehabilitation center for rescued underage camel jockeys, located on a military compound near Abu Dhabi. The center, which is run in coordination with human rights activist Ansar Burney, offers the children medical care and basic education while awaiting repatriation. Approximately 30 of the rescued boys were housed in the shelter by the end of the year.

There was an increasing number of media reports during the year of trafficking in women and girls to the country, especially to Dubai, for the purposes of sexual exploitation, although the Government pledged and took some measures to eliminate this practice. It was unknown whether these measures were effective. Often, women were brought into the country with false job offers in the hotel or medical sectors or as domestic servants, but upon arrival they were forced into prostitution. The traffickers, who almost always were citizens of the victims' home countries, reportedly seized their passports and forced them to work as prostitutes to repay their travel and living expenses, which quickly became unmanageable. However, the women received little or no payment for their work, which made it difficult or impossible to repay their debts. There were reports that traffickers commonly "sold" their victims to other traffickers, and the new traffickers held victims responsible for paying off the new, higher debt.

Observers believe that trafficking activity was conducted with the complicity of some of the women's citizen sponsors and with noncitizen traffickers who were exploiting the sponsorship system to engage in illicit activity.

Law enforcement, particularly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, investigated reports of trafficking. The police in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the Ministries of Interior, Health, and Justice, all held anti-trafficking training courses throughout the year.

The Government also provided assistance to trafficking victims. Counseling services are available in public hospitals and jails. The Dubai police sponsored a Crime Victims' Assistance Program, and assigned program coordinators in police stations throughout the city.

In July 2003, the Government banned the widespread practice of sponsors forcing workers to surrender their passports as a condition of employment. However, the practice reportedly continued to be widespread.

Persons with Disabilities

There is no federal legislation requiring accessibility for persons with disabilities; however, most public buildings provided access to disabled persons. There were no reported incidents of discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, or in the provision of other state services.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs sponsored six government-managed physical and mental rehabilitation centers and one employment center, which were open only to citizens. The Ministry of Interior also operates a training and employment center in Al Ain, which trained 100 citizens from all emirates, primarily for public sector jobs, during the year. In 2003, individuals, associations, and local governments created 17 additional centers. The Government of Dubai emirate opened a training center during the year to build professional skills, including English language and computer skills, for the visually impaired.

Other rehabilitation centers were partially owned by the Government or were maintained by charity associations. There was also a significant amount of nongovernmental financial assistance, services, and emotional support to citizens with disabilities.

One percent of all jobs in the federal government are reserved for persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Societal discrimination against noncitizens, while not legally sanctioned, was prevalent and occurred in most areas of daily life, including employment, housing, social interaction, and healthcare. Employment, immigration, and security policies, as well as cultural attitudes towards noncitizens, who comprised approximately 85 percent of the national population, were conditioned by national origin.

More than 50 percent of foreign workers were estimated to have come from the Indian subcontinent. Noncitizens are denied access to many free or reduced-cost services provided by the Government to citizens, including child and adult education, health care, housing, and social and recreational club memberships. While citizens who contract HIV are afforded full, continuous, and free healthcare, noncitizen migrant workers who contract the same disease are denied healthcare and deported. In December, the local press reported that the Ministry of Health would offer a health insurance plan for citizens and expatriates that would give them coverage in all private and public health facilities. Coverage programs were not implemented by the end of the year.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Both civil and Shari'a law criminalize homosexual activity. In practice, reports of governmental or societal discrimination against individuals based on sexual orientation are uncommon.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law does not specifically entitle or prohibit workers from forming or joining unions; however, if they existed, unions would be subject to general restrictions on the right of association.

Since 1995, the country has been suspended from the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) insurance programs because of the Government's non-compliance with some internationally recognized worker rights standards.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Although the law does not grant workers the right to engage in collective bargaining, it expressly authorizes collective work dispute resolution. The Government granted some professional associations limited freedom to raise work-related concerns, to

lobby the Government for redress, and to file grievances with the Government.

The labor law does not address the right to strike; however, Ministry of Labor officials have said that the law does not forbid strikes, and if laborers feel they are denied their rights, they can stop working. In that case, such workers would be subject to deportation for breach of contract. There were no reports of groups of workers being deported for striking. In practice, there were numerous strikes by private sector employees in addition to organized gatherings of workers who complained of unpaid wages and hazardous or unfair working conditions to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The Government prohibits strikes by public sector employees on national security grounds.

The Ministry of Labor (MOL) reviews employment contracts for workers in the industrial and service sectors to ensure compliance with the labor laws.

The MOL distributed information to foreign workers outlining their rights under the labor law and how to pursue labor disputes, whether individually or collectively. Employees may file individual or collective employment dispute complaints with the Ministry of Labor, which serves as the mediator between the parties. If the dispute remains unresolved, the employee may file a complaint with the labor court system. In a collective work dispute concerning a subject of interest to a group in an establishment, trade, vocation or in a certain vocational sector, employees or employers may file complaints with the Ministry of Labor if they are unable to settle such disputes amicably. The labor law gives the MOL 2 weeks to resolve the dispute or refer it to courts. In practice, it generally takes a month or more for this to happen. If the Ministry of Labor is unable to mediate a settlement within 10 business days, the complaint is to be submitted to a Conciliation Committee for mediation. Either the employee or employer can appeal the Conciliation Committee's decision to a Supreme Committee of Conciliation, whose decision, while final, is only enforceable if both parties agree to the decision. Either party can, at any time in the process, ask that their dispute be referred to the Court of First Instance.

The labor law does not cover, and therefore does not protect, government employees, domestic servants, and agricultural workers; however, a Civil Service Law covers government employees. The Ministry of Interior's Naturalization and Residency Administration mandated use of standard contracts for noncitizen domestic servants, clearly listing the salary, work requirements, and duration of employment. Domestic workers may bring work-related disputes to conciliation committees organized by the Ministry of Interior or to the Court of First Instance, and most disputes between employers and domestic servants are settled by the Ministry of the Interior.

Domestic servants and agricultural workers have historically faced considerable difficulty in negotiating employment contracts because the mandatory requirements contained in the labor law do not apply. They also faced considerable difficulty in obtaining assistance to resolve disputes with their employers. The law ties workers' residency permission to their sponsorship by their employer. Moreover, most employment contracts stipulate that for 6 months after the end of employment, the employee is forbidden from working for a "competitor," unless the former employee obtains a letter of "no objection" from the former employer. This regulation has been widely used to restrict foreign worker labor mobility inside the country. Some professional-level workers, such as doctors, engineers, and consultants, are allowed to switch employers without leaving the country.

In 2003, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs increased the number of inspectors from 48 to 60 and, for the first time, enabled them to fine violators.

Businesses in free trade zones must comply with federal labor law; however, the Ministry of Labor did not regulate them. Instead, each free trade zone maintains its own labor department to address workers' concerns.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor for both adults and children; however, employment agents continued to bring some foreign workers to the country to work under forced or compulsory conditions. Women were brought to the country under false promises of legitimate employment and were instead forced into prostitution (see Section 5). Low-paid unskilled and semi-skilled workers were also victims of contract switching.

The law prohibits forced or compulsory child labor, and the Government generally enforced this prohibition effectively, except in the cases of child camel jockeys (see Sections 4, 5, and 6.d.).

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The labor law prohibits employment of persons under the age of 15 and has special provisions for employing those 15 to 18 years of age. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for enforcing the regulations. The Government does not issue work permits for foreign workers under the age of 18 years. Child labor was not tolerated, with the exception of child camel jockeys (see Sections 4, 5, and 6.c.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Noncitizens comprised approximately 98 percent of the private sector workforce. The country was a destination for a large

number of unskilled workers, including up to 300,000 domestic servants, most of them women from South and East Asia, and a much larger number of unskilled male workers, mostly from South Asia. These unskilled laborers actively competed for jobs in the country and in other Gulf countries, and they were sometimes subject to poor working conditions. Female domestic servants sometimes faced abusive working conditions.

The standard workday is 8 hours per day, and the standard workweek is 6 days per week; however, these standards were not strictly enforced. Domestic servants and agricultural workers were not covered by the labor law and were often obliged to work longer than the mandated standard. According to the Ministry of Labor and the labor law, employees are entitled 2 days of annual leave per month after finishing six months on the job, up until that person passes the 1-year mark, after which the employee is entitled to 30 calendar days of annual leave in addition to national holidays.

There is no minimum wage. Salaries depended on the occupation and employer and ranged from 400 dirhams (\$109) per month for domestic or agricultural workers to 600 dirhams (\$164) per month for construction workers to much higher salaries for highly skilled and white-collar employees. Compensation packages generally provided housing or housing allowances. However, low-skilled employees were often provided with substandard living conditions, including overcrowded apartments or lodging in unsafe and unhygienic "labor camps," lack of electricity, lack of potable water, and lack of adequate cooking and bathing facilities. In addition, other benefits, such as food, homeward passage or health cards for minimal to no-cost healthcare were often provided for employees by their employers. Some low-paid workers did not receive these benefits, even if stipulated in their contracts. Local newspapers detailed numerous cases of non-payment of wages to foreign workers, but also reported the Ministry of Labor blacklisted nearly 1,100 firms in the first 7 months of the year in Dubai and the northern Emirates, for violating the labor law, particularly for failing to pay salaries, employing workers who are sponsored by others, or providing substandard living or working conditions.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reviews labor contracts and does not approve any that stipulate substandard wages.

Most foreign workers do not earn the minimum salary required to obtain residency permits for their families. The Government wishes to ensure that accompanying families are supported adequately. Accordingly, the required monthly minimum salary to permit accompanying families is 3,924 dirhams (\$1,090), or 2,941 dirhams (\$817) per month when housing or an additional housing allowance is provided.

The law requires that employers provide employees with a safe work environment. Local medical experts recommend that it is inadvisable for laborers to work outdoors when the temperature exceeds 40 degrees Celsius, and that employers provide safety helmets and adjust work hours to reduce exposure to the sun. However, there were numerous press reports that workers were required to work without such safety measures in temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius and higher. Workers often complained that employers did not provide water, shade, or break periods for outdoor laborers working in the summer heat, and often laborers' cramped living accommodations did not include air conditioning. According to press reports, as many as 80 laborers per day were treated for heat stroke in hospital emergency rooms in the summer.

The Ministry of Labor received 11,424 complaints involving 16,424 laborers during the year. The majority of complaints concerned unpaid wages. The media reported an estimate by unidentified municipal sources of a 61 percent increase in construction site accidents during the year, rising to 149 accidents.

Workers' jobs were not protected if they removed themselves from what they considered to be unsafe working conditions. However, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs can force employers to reinstate workers who were dismissed for refusing to perform unsafe work. Injured workers are entitled to fair compensation, and all workers have the right to lodge labor-related grievances with the Ministry of Labor, which mediates the dispute between the parties. Either party has the right to end mediation at any time and have their complaint referred to the Court of First Instance. Workers, particularly unskilled workers, in dispute with their employers over unpaid wages, generally agree to a mediated settlement for less money than they are owed to avoid a protracted court battle. However, workers in disputes with employers generally do not take action due to fear of reprisals, including withdrawal of sponsorship or deportation.

There were reports that some employers abused domestic workers. Allegations included excessive work hours, nonpayment of wages, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and restriction of movement. Domestic workers may file complaints with the Ministry of Interior or go to court. During the year, the Ministry of Interior took action against hundreds of employers who abused or failed to pay their domestic employees. According to new regulations, ministry officials can ban an employer from further sponsorship of domestic employees after receiving four reports of abuse.

Sponsorship and residency laws do not permit most foreign national employees to change employers. Employers historically have held their employees' passports, thus preventing them from leaving the country without prior permission. In 2003, the Federal Supreme Court ruled that employers could not legally withhold employees' passports because they were personal documents (see Section 5). The Ministry of Labor distributed pamphlets to foreign workers advising them to report employers who violated this regulation. However, there were reports that, in many cases, the law did not have a practical impact on either the private or public sectors, and withholding passports from employees still occurred.

When employees leave their work without a valid reason before the expiration of the contract from a limited period, they may not, even with the employer's consent, take up other employment for 1 year from the date on which they left their work. The Ministry of Labor is the concerned authority for enforcing this rule (see Section 2.d.).

Employers did not always follow laws regarding the sponsorship of foreign employees. Under these regulations, a company that has one or more employees with an expired work permit will be barred from employing new staff. However, the rule was not enforced consistently.

A law enacted in 2003 requires all foreign workers seeking jobs in the private sector to have at least a high school certificate or equivalent degree. Arabs and construction, agricultural, and domestic workers were exempt from the law.

The Government enforced health and safety standards and required every large industrial enterprise to employ a certified occupational safety officer; however, these standards were reportedly not observed uniformly.

There were no reports of citizens who were involuntarily transferred, retired, or terminated from government employment sectors, including universities, due to their political affiliations or opinions.